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AUTHOR Glaser, Susan R.
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ABSTRACT

Triangulation, the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon, can be used to address a number of concerns arising in organizational communication research. This approach was used in a study of organizational culture by employing qualitative interview research to help interpret or place in context the results of statistical analyses. As a first step in the study, a questionnaire was developed from data gathered in interviews with 15 employees representing a diagonal cross-section of an organization. The resulting questionnaire addressed five major areas of organizational culture: (1) climate, (2) involvement, (3) communication, (4) meetings, and (5) supervision. The questionnaire was then administered to all 267 members of the organization and analyzed by department and organizational level. Next, interviews were held with 45 employees representing every department and level. Analyses of data revealed significant differences between employees of different organizational levels and departments on each of the dimensions of organizational culture. The nature of the information accessed by each of the two methodologies clearly diverged, with questionnaire data revealing attitudes, and interviews showing why an attitude was held and how respondents made sense of what they believed to be true. (FL)

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Accessing Organizational Culture: An Interpretive Approach

Susan R. Glaser
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403

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Accessing Organizational Culture: An Interpretive Approach

Recent research has approached organizational communication from a cultural perspective (Pettigrew, 1979; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). Yet with all that has been written about organizational culture, the construct still remains to be fully operationalized and measured. To this point, most work on organizational culture has been conceptual rather than empirical in nature (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). This is understandable given the methodological challenges of accessing culture in an organizational setting. If, as Pettigrew (1979) argues, organizational cultures are created through symbol, ideology, belief, ritual, and myth, then accessing a given culture is a complex methodological task.

The continuing debate concerning quantitative and qualitative research emerges vigorously in the study of organizational culture. Quantitative measures, such as self-report questionnaires, have the advantage of efficiency, comprehensiveness, and stability (Albrecht & Ropp, 1982). These same measures, however, are limited by semantic problems, sampling errors, and the unverified assumption that self-report data constitute actual behavioral information (Dennis, Goldhaber & Yates, 1978). In addition, self-report questionnaires presume the researcher knows what questions to ask before entering a given organization (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). To minimize the disadvantages of self-report surveys, Dennis et al. (1978) encourage researchers to avoid incidental sampling and subject self-selection, and, instead, select meaningful organizational sampling units.

Qualitative measures, such as interviews, have the advantage of providing meanings and interpretations of why organizational interactions occurred, how they occurred, and what transpired. They have the potential to provide a more

in-depth, textured account of the communication processes involved in a given organizational culture. Such qualitative techniques provide a way to move beyond description of relational structures to interpretation of these structures. Qualitative research may be limited, however, by the lack of rigorous conventional coding standards and possible inaccuracies of observers' interpretations (Albrecht & Ropp, 1982). To minimize these limitations and to facilitate the cross-validation of results, researchers are urged to use two interviewers, an immediate debriefing period, and two data gathering techniques in every study (Dennis, et al., 1978).

Triangulation has been proposed to address many of these methodological concerns. Triangulation refers to the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Faules, 1982). The goal is to maximize a single method's benefits while neutralizing its limitations. By approaching the same phenomenon from different viewpoints, triangulation offers an approach for cross validation (Jick, 1979). The implicit premise in the triangulation approach is that qualitative and quantitative methods should be complimentary; each method has weaknesses which can be compensated for by the other. An interpretive assumption of triangulation is that organizational culture is a subjective creation of organizational participants rather than having its own objective, independent existence. This means that data do not exist independent of the perceptions of organizational members, and that the researcher must participate in the organizational setting to understand organizational meaning (Albrecht & Ropp, 1982).

The use of multi methods, or triangulation, in organizational research has been advocated more than employed. The research reported on in this paper offers a triangulation approach to the study of organizational culture by employing qualitative interview research to help interpret or place in context the results of statistical analyses.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire Development and Administration:

Fifteen interviews were initially held with a diagonal cross section of the organization. The purpose of these interviews was to ground the researchers in employees' subjective impressions of the organization. By interviewing personnel at each organizational level and department, researchers were subsequently able to develop a questionnaire that was grounded in the perceptions of organizational members and the subjective reality of that particular organizational culture.

A 62 item questionnaire was then developed that addressed the major areas of organizational concern discussed in the interviews. The sections of the questionnaire included: Climate, Involvement, Communication, Meetings, and Supervision. Questions utilized a 5-point Likert-type scale. The Climate items asked subjects to report on their perceptions of their work environment and its effect on their satisfaction and productivity. For example:

-- I enjoy working in this organization.
-- This company cares about its workers.
-- The atmosphere in this organization makes me want to work my hardest.
-- I feel valued by this company.
-- People trust each other in this company.

The Involvement items elicited responses about subjects' perceived level of participation in decisions related to their work performance. For example:

-- I have an impact on what happens in my work group.
-- I am asked to make suggestions about how to do my job better.
-- I am involved in the decisions that effect me.
-- Decisions in this organization are handed down from the top.

The Communication items asked subjects to describe their perceptions of the amount and quality of upward, downward, and lateral communication in the organization. For example:

-- I get the information I need to do my job well.
-- I have access to the management team.
-- I know what I need to do to get promoted.
-- I am informed about what's happening in departments outside my own.

The Meeting items elicited responses about each subject's perception of the value of time spent in meetings. For example:

-- Meetings I attend are productive.
-- I know ahead of time what meetings are about.
-- I would like to spend less time in meetings.
-- Decisions made at meetings get put into action.

The Supervision items asked subjects to report on their perceptions of their relationship with their immediate supervisor. For example:

-- I can discuss work problems with my supervisor.
-- My supervisor blames me when things go wrong.
-- I am treated fairly by my supervisor.
-- I get feedback on my performance from my supervisor.

Questionnaires were administered to every organizational member (N = 267), and were filled out in scheduled locations at scheduled times. This eliminated the problems of poor return rate and sampling error. Survey results were analyzed by <u>department</u> [Production (N=170), Maintenance (N=35), Warehouse (N=12), Transportation (N=13), Office (N=27), Administration (N=10)], and by <u>organizational level</u> [hourly workers (N=217), salaried (N=37), middle management (N=9), and executive management (N=4)]. Scores on each of the five dimensions of organizational culture were obtained by averaging the non-missing scores for appropriate questionnaire items. For two subjects (1 hourly production; 1 hourly maintenance), no score could be computed for the meeting dimension.

<u>Interviews</u>

Interviews were then conducted with 45 organizational members. Subjects interviewed represented every level and department in the organization.

Interview questions were designed to elicit the subjective meanings of organizational members to help in the interpretations of the statistical data. The interview strategy was to get respondents to describe their personal interpretations of organizational phenomena with as much detail as possible. A typical sequence of questions would include: Are you encouraged to make suggestions about how to do your job better? Can you give an incident where you had a suggestions that (was/was not) listened to? Describe the incident in as much detail as you can. How often do such incidents occur?

RESULTS

Two one-way Analyses of Variance were performed to determine if significant differences existed on each of the 5 dimensions of communication culture (climate, involvement, communication, meetings, and supervision) by level of organization (executive management, mid management, salaried, and hourly workers) and organizational department (production, maintenance, warehouse, transportation, office, and administration).

Level or Organization Differences

Significant differences were obtained for the effects of level of organization on each of the 5 dimensions of organizational culture. The F ratios and significance levels are presented below:

Insert Table 1 About Here

In addition to the standard one-way Analysis of Variance, post hoc comparisons (Duncan's Multiple Range Test) were perfolmed to determine if significant differences existed between pairs of groups for each organizational culture dimension. Means for each of theses groups on all 5 dimensions are presented below.

Insert Table 2 About Here

In general, there was a tendency for the hourly workers to score lower than the other groups on all dimensions. Similarly, executive managers scored higher than the other 3 groups. Executive management results must be interpreted with caution, however. Because of disparate sample sizes, homogeneity of variance tests indicated that homogeneity did not exist among the four groups. Further research must be conducted with larger numbers of executive managers.

Organizational Department Differences

A similar pattern of significant differences was obtained for the effects of organizational department on each of the 5 dimensions of organizational culture. The F ratios and significance levels are presented below:

Insert Table 3 About Here

In addition to the standard one-way Analysis of Variance, Duncan's Multiple Range Test was again performed to determine if significant differences existed between pairs of departmental groups on each organizational culture dimension. Means for each of these groups on all 5 dimensions are presented below.

Insert Table 4 About Here

Significant differences for department were obtained on each of the 5 dimensions of organizational culture. These differences reflected the same kinds of differences that were found at the organizational level, with higher prestige departments (office, administration) scoring significantly higher than lower prestige departments (production, maintenance).

Following the analyses of statistical data, interviews were examined to discover which findings converged or diverged with the survey findings, and to interpret these patterns. Interview notes were analyzed to discover major themes related to Climate, Involvement, Communication, Meetings, and Supervision. Several major themes emerged from interview responses. According to Calder, (Albrecht & Ropp, 1982), a way of reporting respondent views is to group quoted phrases under each theme. Below are some examples.

Theme 1: Hourly workers feel their ideas are not listened to, even though they believe their suggestions would save the company both time and money. They are often given no reasons for ideas turned down.

- "My foreman doesn't respond to my ideas. He says, "we've done that already or that won't work or that would be too costly.' He doesn't want to bother management with bad ideas."

- "If people working on a job were asked before changes were made, they could get our ideas. Now new things come from people in the office -- not people working on the job."

- "A lot of good ideas are met with, "Yeh, we'll think about it'. then they don't use it. They get defensive if it's not their idea. We don't get credit for being thinking human beings."

Theme 2: Hourly workers feel that by making suggestions they are labeled "trouble makers". The result seems to be a loss of desire to make further input.

- "I decided to talk up more about ideas. Now I'm getting a reputation as a complainer even though 75% of my suggestions are good."

- "When people make suggestions around here they get classed as 'trouble-makers.'"

- "If you get your hand slapped enough times, you'll stop trying. You learn to put in your 8 hours and keep your mouth shut."

Theme 3: Hourly workers feel unappreciated for their hard work. They feel that good work is taken for granted, and only "mess-ups" are noticed.

- "I get no feedback on my good work -- even though I have asked for it. I get no reward at all."

- "Good work is not noticed. You only hear when something bad happens. The top man could come by and tell you if things are looking good."

- "They zap you if something goes wrong. Like when the color on the paneling wasn't right. Then I heard about it."

Theme 4: Executive managers, and to some extent middle managers, feel listened to and involved in the decisions that effect them. They feel they are noticed for their accomplishments and often asked for suggestions about how to do things better. They enjoy working in this organization.

- "On the whole, morale is very good, very cohesive; we're open to new ideas and suggestions."

- "This place is plywood heaven."

- "My people feel like they're part of a participatory organization. I let them run their own ship."

- "People take negative criticism in a very objective manner."

- "People seem to work hard and enjoy it here."

DISCUSSION

Analyses of questionnaire data revealed significant differences between employees of different organizational levels and departments on each of the 5 targeted dimensions of organizational culture: Climate, Involvement, Commun-

ication, Meetings, and Supervision. The perceptions of respondents revealed in the analyses of questionnaire data were confirmed by the interviews which illustrated qualitatively why employee perspectives were so different. The nature of the information accessed by each of the two different methods clearly diverged. Questionnaire data revealed expressed attitudes. The interviews illustrated why a particular attitude was held and how respondents made sense of what they believed to be true. Taken together, both methods validate the premise that significant differences did exist among the perceptions of workers at different organizational levels and departments regarding five dimensions of organizational culture.

The results of this research must be interpreted in light of a number of inherent limitations. First, no behavioral data were collected. Although the researchers did spend time observing the organization in operation, no systematic data collection was conducted in these situations. Though direct observation represented an important goal of the researchers, executive management was not convinced of its relevance. This means the study must make the uncomfortable assumption that self report data represent behavioral tendencies in actual work situations. The challenge of convincing executive management of the importance of direct observation research will remain for all organizational culture researchers who study organizations in their natural state.

In addition, item analysis must now be performed on each questionnaire item so that strongly and weakly correlated items are dropped and a refined version of the scale developed. Subsequent versions of the Organizational Culture Scale must then be given to other organizations to determine whether the dimensions of organizational culture revealed in this organization are present

in other organizations as well. In this study, unequal sample sizes were the cost of studying an entire ongoing organizational culture in its natural state. Most organizations are similar to this one in the relatively small number of executive managers compared to hourly workers.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this research is that it studied an ongoing organization in its natural environment and addressed a number of limitations of both qualitative and quantitative research. Quantitative methods have been regularly criticized for their sampling errors which make interpretation of results difficult. To avoid sampling errors, researchers are cautioned to avoid incidental sampling, prevent subject self selection, and use meaningful sampling units (Dennis, Goldhaber, & Yates, 1978). The present research addresses all of these concerns. Because 100% of all organizational employees were given release time to fill out questionnaires in a designated location, sampling errors were eliminated entirely.

A second criticism of quantitative research is that questionnaires often present semantic and interpretive problems for subjects who might not understand the researcher's intended meaning (Dennis, Goldhaber & Yates, 1978). Related to this concern is the criticism that organizational surveys presume that a researcher knows before entering an organization what questions are relevant and important to ask (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). The current research addresses both of these objections. Since the questionnaire was designed after a series of interviews with a diagonal cross section of organizational employees, each questionnaire item was developed using the language of the company's culture as revealed in the series of initial interviews. This approach also allowed for the development of a questionnaire that addressed the unique characteristics of a particular organizational culture rather than the researcher's preconceived assumptions of what that culture would be.

This study also addresses a number of limitations of qualitative research. The major criticism of qualitative research involves concern about researcher interpretation and bias. The interpretive problems in this study were greatly reduced by two recommendations made by Dennis, Goldhaber & Yates (1978). First, rather than one interviewer, three were used with regular, immediate debriefing periods. In addition, to facilitate the cross-validation of results, two data gathering techniques were employed. This meant that qualitative interview data were balanced with statistical analyses. Consequently, this study represents a replicable effort to access organizational culture both quantitatively and qualitatively. It offers researchers an approach to studying the ways in which employees at different organizational levels and departments perceive and interpret the world of their company.

Table 1
Level of Organization Differences

Climate	$F(3, 263) = 12.12$, $p < .001$
Involvement	$F(3, 263) = 22.15$, $p < .001$
Communication	$F(3, 263) = 12.32$, $p < .001$
Meetings	$F(3, 261) = 9.23$, $p < .001$
Supervision	$F(3, 263) = 10.52$, $p < .001$

Table 2

Level of Organization Differences:

Post Hoc Comparisons

Level of Organization

Organizational Culture Dimension	Hourly	Salaried	Mid Management	Exec. Management
Climate	3.11_a	3.49_b	$3.58_{b,c}$	4.06_c
Involve.	2.76_a	3.61_b	3.63_b	4.08_b
Communic.	2.80_a	3.26_b	$3.57_{b,c}$	4.09_c
Meetings	2.63_a	3.11_b	3.11_b	3.35_b
Supervis.	2.90_a	3.53_b	3.53_b	3.79_b

NOTE: Means with the same subscript are not significantly different at the $p < .05$ level as determined by Duncan's Multiple Range Test.

Table 3

Organizational Department Differences

Climate	$F(5, 261) = 5.13$, $p < .001$
Involvement	$F(5, 261) = 8.40$, $p < .001$
Communication	$F(5, 261) = 4.53$, $p < .001$
Meetings	$F(5, 259) = 3.96$, $p < .01$
Supervision	$F(5, 261) = 6.13$, $p < .001$

Table 4

Organizational Department Differences:
Post Hoc Comparisons

Organizational Department

Organizational Culture Dimension	Prod.	Mainten.	Warehouse	Transport.	Office	Adminst.
Climate	3.12_{a}	3.11_{a}	$3.14_{a,b}$	$3.44_{a,b}$	3.55_{b}	3.56_{b}
Involvement	2.77_{a}	$2.91_{a,b}$	$3.12_{a,b}$	$2.91_{a,b}$	3.68_{c}	$3.42_{b,c}$
Communic.	2.80_{a}	2.80_{a}	$3.14_{a,b}$	$3.17_{a,b}$	3.30_{b}	3.43_{b}
Meetings	$2.68_{a,b}$	2.50_{a}	$2.68_{a,b}$	$2.84_{a,b}$	3.11_{b}	3.10_{b}
Supervision	2.92_{a}	$3.09_{a,b}$	$3.19_{a,b,c}$	2.58_{a}	3.63_{c}	$3.45_{b,c}$

NOTE: Means with the same subscript are not significantly different at the $p < .05$ level as determined by Duncan's Multiple Range Test.

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